Michael Ehmann 20 April 2006

The Monopolized Circus

Many Americans who enjoy attending the circus as a pure form of entertainment would argue that the circus serves only as an escape from the commonplace and mundane existence that the average citizen experiences. Surely, this was as true one century ago as it is today. Those who provide the entertainment in the ring, however, while surely apt to agree with such an assessment, certainly would not ignore the fact that circuses are businesses. Both historically and presently, in order to survive and to continue to perform, each American circus must "defeat" its competition. These seemingly contrary emphases for the American circus shed an informative light upon the business practices of the American circus during and soon after the Golden Age of the American circus at the turn of the twentieth century.

During this era, while President Theodore Roosevelt staked his presidency on "trust-busting" and the outlawing of corporate monopolies, the American circus was undergoing an era of profound consolidation. This conglomeration resulted in "large, powerful companies that came to control the entire industry."[1] After a brief study of both the history of anti-trust action in the United States and the history of monopoly formation among American circuses, one will plainly see how these seemingly contradictory yet simultaneous occurrences are fitting with the broader historical context of the American circus.

Immediately following the Civil War and through the late 19th century, the American public was beginning to become wary of the consolidation of American

[1] LaVahn Hoh, "Circus In America Timeline," 2004, University of Virginia, 14 April 2006 <http://www.circusinamerica.org/public/timlines?date2=1905&date1=1872>.

businesses and the abuses of industry enacted by corporations.[2] Upon his ascent to the Presidency of the United States in 1901, Theodore Roosevelt immediately began an effort to curb the influence of corporate trusts. Building upon decades of political efforts towards regulatory commercial legislation, Roosevelt finally succeeded in 1906 with the passage of the Hepburn Act. The Hepburn Act increased the ability of the Interstate Commerce Commission and the federal government to regulate railroad-shipping rates. Specifically, the Hepburn Act succeeded where previous efforts had failed in efforts to prevent railroad companies from providing better shipping rates to large corporations rather than to smaller shippers.[3] Facing fierce opposition from railroad corporations and other special interest groups, Roosevelt campaigned tirelessly to garner national support for his legislation. To this end, Roosevelt often utilized the press and public opinion to pressure his opponents into action. It was from his ardent opposition to monopolies during these years that Roosevelt earned his nickname as a "trustbuster."

As history has proven repeatedly, the American public has only a certain limit to its patience with matters of political posturing. As the Golden Age of the circus was ending, the circus was still an enormously popular form of entertainment. During the early twentieth century, "whole towns shut down on circus day – schools, shops, and offices – an occasion when everything but fantasy and excitement stood still."[4] It is for this reason that Americans did not concern themselves with the "backyard" corporate maneuvering of the circus owners. Instead, the circus served the purpose that it always had – as an escape from normal everyday issues; specifically, the intra-Washington

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[2] Steven Gillon, Cathy Matson, *The American Experiment: Volume II* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2002) 709.
[3] Sidney Milkis, Michael Nelson, *The American Presidency* (Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2003), 207-208.
[4] LaVahn Hoh, William Rough, *Step Right Up* (White Hall: Betterway Publications, 1990), 13.

battles among Roosevelt, Congress and huge corporations. Although the morning papers would be filled with news about the Hepburn Act, the afternoons could be filled with the escapism provided by the circus.

There was, however, more than met the eye during the Golden Age of the circus. During this era, circus owners were actively restructuring the entirety of the American circus as shows were continuously bought and sold. Following the deaths of the charismatic leaders of "The Greatest Show on Earth," P.T. Barnum and James A. Bailey in 1891 and 1906 respectively, a rivalry began between the two large circus conglomerates that would carry on the mantle that Barnum and Bailey had established. It is interesting to note, however, that Barnum and Bailey formed their partnership only after enduring years of bitter competition.

In a matter of years, the Ringling Brothers Circus had rapidly expanded. "By 1889…they had 110 horses. In 1890, they had expanded to two rings and a stage, and put the show on their own rail cars. In 1891 they owned 22 cars; the next year it had grown to 32."[5] By 1907, the Ringling Brothers were able to buy Barnum and Bailey following the death of James Bailey. For just over a decade, Ringling Brothers operated their two shows – Ringling Bros. Circus, and Barnum and Bailey Circus – separately. The fact that in the year following the passage of the most sweeping anti-trust legislation in American history two of the largest competing shows were owned by a common owner, however, is indicative of the ways in which the American circus was not affected by the prevailing American predilection toward breaking up monopolies. Eventually, to further the point, the shows were combined as the Ringling Brothers Barnum and Bailey Circus became a single entity.

[5] George Speaight, *A History of the Circus* (London: The Tantivy Press, 1980), 144.

While the Ringling Brothers Barnum and Bailey Circus was hailed as "The Greatest Show on Earth", it received rather stiff competition from the Peru, Indiana-based American Circus Corporation and its five associated shows.[6] It quickly became evident, however, that as the economy began to turn with the approach of the Great Depression, popular demand no longer mandated two huge corporations competing for attendance. Nevertheless, "hesitant agreements not to fight each other broke down."[7] Soon after, however, John Ringling, the owner of the Ringling Brothers Barnum and Bailey, borrowed enough funds to buy the American Circus Corporation from Jerry Mugivan, thereby consolidating eleven different circuses under his sole control.[8]

Why did these major circus owners seek to purchase and control as many circuses as possible? The answer is simple: circus was and is a business. By buying out the competition, an owner can essentially assure success for his show. The American public, however, seemed to largely ignore the monopolized actions of the circus industry. The possible explanations for this fact are varied. It is plausible that the public was unaware of the intricate exchanges of ownership that had little real effect on the performances displayed in the rings. It is also plausible that they did know of the ownership exchanges, but simply did not care for the same reason just given: the intricate exchanges of ownership had little real effect on the performances displayed in the rings. Nevertheless, the circus industry during the Golden Age underwent a significant monopolization of ownership with no recourse tantamount to that found in other monopolized industries during that era.

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[6] Speaight, 144.
[7] Speaight, 144.
[8] Speaight, 146.

The circus has always played a multifaceted role in American history. During the Golden Age of the American Circus at the turn of the 20th century, two of these roles were corporate business undergoing conglomeration and simple, good-natured, enjoyable entertainment. The fact that during its heyday the circus in America was able to play both roles so convincingly is testament to the wonder of the circus that has enraptured audiences for centuries.

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